



ELSAH HISTORY

..... NOS. 43 & 44
1983

Elsah's First Restorations

By Pamela Martin

The author of this article was able to interview four individuals regarding renovations carried out by their families on Elsau homes during the 1940's and 1950's. Unfortunately, substantial information regarding five other restorations was not readily available: the Smith house on Valley Street, the Lyman House on

Mill Street, the Grayson house on Palm Street, the Davis house on La Salle Street and the old Village Inn. Further research will have to be undertaken at a later date to give a more complete picture of the renovations carried out during this time period.



The McNaair-Hosmer House about 1887. William McNaair is standing by a toy locomotive driven by his son, Tommy. Notice the large two-story wooden machine shop attached to the south end of the house.

As we come to cherish our historical atmosphere in Elsay, we find ourselves desiring to understand better some of the motives behind the decision made by Elsay's homeowners. Four present and former residents of the village helped the author learn about these restorations, and these individuals offered their perceptions of the village in times gone by along with interesting anecdotes from their life in Elsay. Mrs. Betsy Read Holt (daughter of Mrs. Eleanor Read), Dr. John Wanamaker, Dr. and Mrs. Ernest Lyons, and Kathryn Johnson (daughter of Mrs. Minna Johnson) all owned houses and made substantial renovations and additions to those structures during the 1940's and 1950's. Each of the renovations involved several motives and a number of goals, but each owner was seeking a mixture of comfort and authenticity at the same time.

To begin with the first of these renovations, in the early 1930's Mr. and Mrs. Read bought the frame house at number 5 Mill street, next door to old Mr. Seager's. Sometime thereafter the Reads bought the brick house at number 3 Mill Street. Mr. Seager, the previous owner, continued to live there for the rest of his life -- until about 1942.

In 1947 after World War II, when materials were again available, the Reads did a restoration of the house. Mrs. Read and her architect, John B. Hall, renovated the brick house. John Wanamaker firmly believes that Mrs. Read was instrumental in beginning the first period of restorations in Elsay.

Mrs. Read and John Hall found that in order to save the building from falling in, it would have to be rebuilt structurally. They redug the foundation, creating a full basement and then poured a concrete foundation. They then took out the entire interior core of the house in order to strengthen the walls. All the interior walls were redone, but they were careful to keep the original woodwork that was visible. The only modernizing was in the form of bracing behind the walls.

Originally the house had an exterior west staircase going to the bedrooms. There was no plumbing or central heat. The only electricity was a wire that came out along the ceiling and dropped down with a bare light bulb in the middle of the living room. There was a cistern pump in the kitchen, and only a pot-bellied stove (not a fireplace) to heat the entire house.

In John Hall's interior improvements comfort and structural strength were the main considerations. He included an interior stairway to the second floor, the full basement already mentioned, a furnace and hot water heater with necessary plumbing. The old stove came out and a fireplace was put in along with a marble mantel that Mrs. Read saved from a house of the same period that had belonged to her aunt. That home had been torn down. The original floor boards were replaced, but the workmen used peg floors in keeping with the idea of restoration of the past.



L. to R. The Cresswell, McNair-Hosmer, and McNair-Minarick Houses, taken for Principia in March, 1931.

This process took Mrs. Read and her architect several years to complete. In the early 1960's when the River Road was completed and there was easier access to St. Louis, Mrs. Read decided to move permanently to her Elsah home. It was at this time the additional bedroom and garage were added to the home. Again Mr. Hall served as the architect. He designed the new wing to blend in with the original style of the house, and he attached the addition with a considerable degree of success.

As this story continues Dr. John Wanamaker was busy working on his home at the corner of Maple and Mill streets. In May of 1937 "Doc's" mother bought the house as a work project for the Wanamaker brothers John and Ernie. They were in college at the time and it seemed possible to rent the house if it were renovated. The building was in need of a great deal of work. It did have electricity, a cistern, and a hand pump outside to a shallow well. In the kitchen there was an old-fashioned lead sink, and a crude hand pump to draw water from the cistern. "Doc" worked on the house the fall after his mother purchased the property, and a year later he moved in.



Mrs. Minna Johnson standing in the old back door of the McNair House. The foundation for the rear addition is under construction - October, 1953.

For a young man used to the comforts of urban society, the first consideration was the installation of a much-needed bathroom. Walter Cresswell, an expert carpenter and stone mason, helped "Doc" make his home more livable. The bathroom came first, of course. Walter Cresswell found when he put the bathroom in the house that the underpinning was weak because of moisture under the building. "Doc" and Walter Cresswell had to replace all the floor boards. They found a local man who was willing to replace the boards a few at a time so that the house would not be all torn up at any given moment. Cresswell also made one of

the bedrooms smaller and added the back roof area over what had been a temporary porch. The Wanamakers hoped at one time that this addition would be a little upstairs sitting area, but it was never finished because there was no practical way to heat it.

"Doc" also had the electrical wiring redone because he found the original wiring in the attic was a hit-or-miss proposition, and he was naturally concerned about fire hazards. When Miss Maude Nirdlinger was to rent the Wanamaker home, "Doc" did a lot of work in the kitchen to make it nice for her. Miss Nirdlinger was a short woman (about five feet tall), and when she arrived they found there were no cupboards that she could reach. "Doc" conscientiously lowered all the cupboards so that she could at least make use of the lowest shelves.



Mrs. Minna Johnson and Mrs. Lois Lyons in front of the McNair House in the mid 1950's.

"Doc" noted that while he lived in the house and attended Principia College he did not change the front configuration of the house at all; he just added the bathroom and dormer on the back. During the summer of 1947 his parents came to Elsah, and his mother made changes while they lived in the house. She put a new roof on and added the two front dormers. Walter Cresswell did this work. There had been dormers on the roof during the time the Sutherlands owned the house, but they had removed them because the windows were in poor shape. Mr. Cresswell tried to replace these original dormers working from his own recollections of their appearance.

Mrs. Wanamaker also had the drainage in the kitchen improved. She used the dormer in back as a storage space. She also added a deep well and an automatic pump.

Walter Cresswell helped the Wanamakers use items that had been changed over the years. For instance, they discovered that the door from the living room to the back bedroom had been moved. Originally it had been three feet south of its location in 1947. They also found five or six layers of wallpaper along with linen cloth which had been used to help keep the old plaster in place.

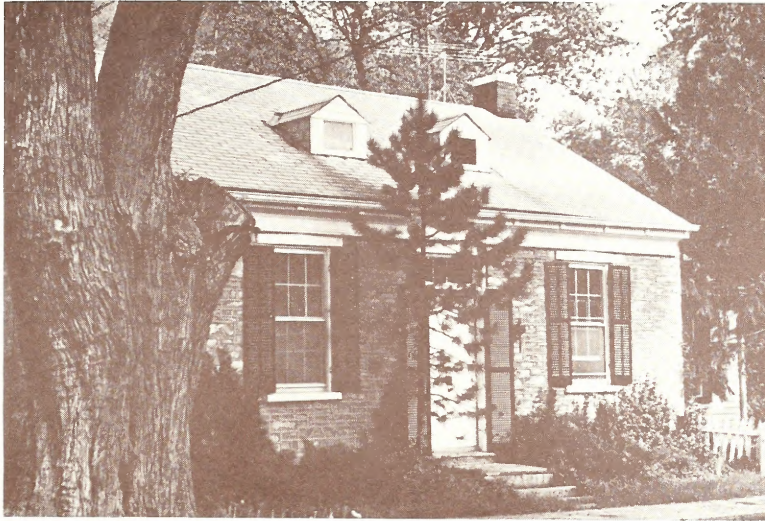
In 1947, just as the Wanamaker project was nearly complete, Ernest Lyons and his family came to Elsau. They moved into the old Schneider house on Mill street. At this time the Lyons were unsure whether they would set up a permanent household in that building. Principia owned the house at first and carried out minor improvements to make it livable for the Lyons. The college added a service porch for a hot water heater and electric pump, and converted the old porch into a bathroom. The Lyons added a dishwasher, clotheswasher, bathtub and shower, which used up their supply of water very fast. They decided to dig a new well, which the Lyons were told was the deepest well in Elsau. It supplied excellent water in such abundance that they used it to water the lawn and garden -- something very unusual in Elsau. Now that Alton water has come to Elsau, the well is no longer used.

The Lyons moved into their house in 1948, and they remained there until 1967. After Dr. Lyons received his doctorate in 1953 they added a bedroom wing. By that time they expected to stay in the house for a long time. A major concern for the Lyons was adding a bedroom that could double as a sitting room for Dr. and Mrs. Lyons to "retreat" to and read or listen to music and relax. They first called on a well-known architect, but found his suggestions tended toward the modern, and were just the opposite of what they were looking for, so they dismissed him. The Robert LeClairs (Dr. LeClair was a Professor of English), friends of the Lyons who lived in the village, knew about architecture and interior design, so the four of them designed what would maintain the quaint Victorian appearance and would best suit the Lyons' needs. They hired a country carpenter from Alton, Ike Duke, who was an excellent workman, to do the job. The additional bedroom wing included a corridor lined with louvered doors and lots of shelf space. The bedroom was a good size, and they added a bathroom as part of that wing.

When the carpenter began remodelling the second floor, which they were converting into a bedroom for their two sons, he discovered that the floor was sloping. He then looked at the first floor and announced to the Lyons that the whole house needed propping. He put steel columns in the basement and firmed up the first floor, then the second floor, and he confidently told the Lyons that the whole house should stand for 500 years.



The Tyler-Read-Holt House in 1962 - before the bedroom addition. (Courtesy of Mrs. Henry Holt.)



The Onetto-Baker House in 1967 showing details of the Wanamaker restoration.
(Photo: Paul O. Williams.)

The house originally had a fireplace, but it had been removed before the Lyons came. Instead of reworking the old fireplace, they found a pre-fab fireplace that they could put on an inside wall, resting on a concrete foundation. It was satisfactory, and even included a regular mantel with a brick front that Ann LeClair designed for Mr. Duke to construct. Mrs. Lyons recalled that while Mr. Duke was building the mantel one day, she and Ann LeClair were watching. Mr. Duke's hammer slipped from its intended mark, and he was concerned about the dent he had put in the wood. Ann took the hammer and began hitting the mantel all over saying, "Good, we want it to look old."

The stairway going to the second floor took up a corner of the Lyons' dining room. They removed the stairs and put them back of the kitchen where there once had been a porch (since enclosed). They also replaced the soft planked wood floors with oak.

The last restorer considered for this article is Mrs. Minna Johnson, who became interested in Elsah in 1931. It was not until 1954 that she actually did renovate a house in the village. That house is now the Hosmer home. Kathryn Johnson remembers her mother saying that the house needed a complete renovation, and that she was uneasy about walking on the floor in one of the rooms.

Kathryn noted that her mother's chief concern and aim was to retain the original simple lines of the house and

its interiors. It was necessary to add the one story portion at the rear for a kitchen, utility room, and a porch. Mrs. Johnson did regret cutting two doors through the rear brick wall (one had been a window) to make this addition.

She gave a great deal of thought to adding the fireplace. Finally Mrs. Johnson decided that it would compliment the house rather than detract. Walter Cresswell built the chimney and fireplace.

The steps going up to the front door were both rickety and unsightly. They were wooden steps with a seat on either side. Mrs. Johnson wanted to replace them with sturdier steps. She looked through many books before finding what she believed to be an appropriate model to replace the wooden steps. Mel Sisson laid the brick stairs that are there now.

In 1959 Kathryn Johnson moved into the house after her mother had passed on. She only did repair work on the house; she did not alter its appearance.

In the preparation of this article the author conducted interviews with two primary sources and two secondary sources. All four individuals commented on the need for comfort in the renovation of these houses. It seemed that the daughters interviewed were especially conscious of the need for maintaining the original structure as much as possible. Their viewpoints may be a reflection of the times and the awareness of those close to the village in the 1940's and 1950's. All four interviewees very much enjoyed their time in the village, and each was glad to have been a part of Elsah. The Holts, of course, still occupy the house renovated by Mrs. Read.



Photo study by Paul Williams of house formerly located on the east side of Mill Street, south of the Fire House. Perhaps it could be titled, "Four easy steps to restoration."



The Bell-Grayson House in 1924--many years before significant changes were made to enclose the screen porch. (Source: Mrs. E. Murphy).



The Schneider-Lyons House in April, 1931--many years before the back addition was added.



Three views of the Keller-Sontag House. Above, around 1900; middle, (by Paul Williams), in 1967 showing the change of windows and portico added by Ruth Lyman in the 1940's; and bottom, (by Paul Williams), showing the picket fence restored by the Sontags in 1978. The Sontags also replaced the casement windows with ones resembling the originals.





Few houses reach this condition before being rescued by some courageous preservationist. This wonderful house was, unfortunately, passed by. It is believed by some to be the former "Sherman House." (Source: G.E. Hamlin). Can anyone else help us to identify this building?



Historic Elsie has spent over \$8000.00 on the restoration of the Village Hall. Here, Gerald Walker and crew prepare to restore the old chimney-flue. The facade was straightened and re-sided by Tom Perotka and Co. in 1974. (Photo: Robert Graul).

An Elsay Homecoming

In March of 1968 your editor visited Mrs. Beulah McNair Carpenter at her home in Hemet, California. Through the generous help of the Cresswell family we had been able to locate a granddaughter of William McNair. Mrs. Carpenter permitted us to copy a number of family photographs and showed us a volume of William McNair's diary that covered 1895 and half of 1896. Since there were important references to her and her cousins in the little book she was not willing to part with the diary at that time. Later in the mid-1970's Mrs. Fay Wilson Hines inherited the McNair memorabilia, including the diary. She was equally sure that the volume should remain in California.



Martha, Marvin, and Shirley McNair on the steps of the McNair-Hosmer House, October, 1983. (Photo: Paul O. Williams.)

This past summer we were able to re-establish communications with the California branch of the McNair family when Mrs. Shirley McNair of Camarillo, California, informed us that her husband Marvin would be coming to Elsay in mid-October. He is a grandson of Eugene McNair, the elder son of William. An exceptionally warm letter from our secretary, Mrs. Edith Belote, prompted a change in plans for the California McNairs -- who had never been to Elsay. Mrs. McNair and her daughter, Martha, decided to join Marvin on his visit. At that point we asked Mrs. McNair if they could bring the diary so that we could inspect it briefly, making a copy for our files. Mrs. Hines graciously permitted the loan of the book for this visit.

In mid-October everything fell into place. The McNair assembled in St. Louis on October 14 and your editor drove down to get the diary so that we could begin copying and proofreading it. On Saturday they drove up for the weekend staying at Maple Leaf Cottages. This was an especially exciting experience for people like Paul Williams, who had devoted months to research in the diaries in order to prepare his pamphlet on the McNair brothers of Elsay. We were about to meet our first real-live McNairs, and they were about to encounter their ancestral roots for the first time.

Now the Principia College Library has all of the important research material on the McNair family in one place. The conclusions reached in Paul Williams' admirable book on the family are firmer than ever: the McNair brothers of Elsay were uncommon common men. The California descendants spent hours poring over the letters and diaries that have been saved here in Elsay. They saw in great detail the story of several Elsay families -- the McNairs of Oregon, the Milfords of Elsay, the McNairs of Elsay and Peoria. By late Sunday night our visitors agreed that they had gained a whole new understanding of their grandparents and their great grandparents. A visit to the Elsay cemetery, dinner in the McNair house, and a walk down to the Mississippi River had brought back the youth of Tommy and Eugene McNair as they alternated between study sessions at the Elsay school and long hunting expeditions in the hills surrounding the village.

When the McNair family left on Monday morning they pledged to return and look even more deeply into their family history. Elsay had once more become a superb research laboratory for local history thanks to the patience and organizational abilities of people like Paul Williams. The weekend had greatly enriched both the McNairs and their hosts in Elsay.

A Report from HEF

Twelve years after the incorporation of our organization it is fair to ask what Historic Elsie Foundation has done for the village. Once again we are asking you to renew your memberships in the Foundation and the board has decided not to raise the price of the regular and sustaining memberships. Instead we have created two new categories of membership that we believe will encourage some of you to support HEF in a broader way. Patrons, for \$50 including a signed and numbered print of an Elsie scene by Glenn Felch, and life memberships for \$500 which would include a dinner for two at Elsie Landing and a night at Maple Leaf Cottages. These added categories of membership represent another means of encouraging what the Foundation has tried to do, and we believe that you should have some reason for upgrading your memberships. But it is of primary importance to the board to keep the largest membership possible by holding down on increases in fees at this time.

Since 1971 HEF has been a significant force in the Elsie preservation picture. For a number of years the organization limited itself to leasing the Village Hall, maintaining it, and publishing newsletters and pamphlets. Memberships and house tours were our only means of support in those years. It was possible in the early 1970's to invest nearly \$8,000 in repairs to the old Village Hall, including a new roof, a new chimney and straightening the building in front. A few years later HEF was able to loan some money to the new Elsie Landing Restaurant in order to help a business that we believed to be a real asset to the economy and atmosphere of Elsie.

Then a major turning-point came in 1976 when the Foundation decided to purchase the commercial building occupied by Elsie Landing. This purchase meant that the HEF board could encourage the restaurant by maintaining a low rent for a number of years. Although the financial encouragement for the new enterprise was a civic contribution, the Foundation soon found itself strapped with large expenses for the major repairs that came right away; the septic system and the roof were the most important. At the same time the restaurant put a good deal of its own profits into improvements in the building. Things appeared to be progressing as they did before because the house tours were just as popular as they ever had been and editor Paul Williams kept up a steady stream of publications in the form of newsletters and pamphlets on many subjects.

By the late 1970's the board concluded that our usual routine had not been the best way to take care of the needs of the Foundation and maintain the character of Elsie. The house tours were the weakest element in our program because it was becoming impossible to handle the crowds of people who came to our community each Mothers Day and we could only offer the same houses year after year. For two years in the early 1980's we tried to offer only walking tours to bus groups who made appointments ahead of time. That also proved to be impractical because it required at least fifteen to twenty tours a year

to give us the income level of the original open house visits. This dilemma was solved partially by re-negotiating the lease with the restaurant, and it appeared the Historic Elsie Foundation was on a much better financial plane. In the fall of 1982 we were able to retire the mortgage on the commercial building and fully expected to support new historical programs in the community.

Then came the rains and floods of December, 1982. For years we had dreaded the repairs that would have to be made on the south side of the commercial building where the clapboards were in need of replacement. As the rains poured into the basement for yet another time it was clear that the Elsie Landing could not operate unless we made major repairs. Glenn Felch, who had worked for years to insure the maintenance of the building, helped to cover the structure with a protective sheet of plastic. A loan negotiated in January, 1983, made it possible to carry out nearly all of the needed work. Even the unusually mild winter cooperated with us as the building took on a new face.

During the past twelve years the board members of the Foundation had struggled with a vast number of administrative and historical problems, and now it was possible to chart a new course for the Foundation. Some of these individuals had served as original incorporators in 1971, such as Edith Belote, Alma Barnes and Charles Hosmer, along with Inge Mack who has acted as executive director of the organization. Two of the original board members are no longer with us, but their services have been chronicled in the newsletter, Mrs. Josephine Copeland and Mrs. Pat Farmer. Mrs. Barbara Swett moved away from our community and Cyrus A. Bunting and Paul O. Williams have left the board after a number of years of selfless service. Mrs. Shirley Vogt recently left the board after helping us as treasurer for a number of years. Now the Foundation enjoys the support of a newer generation of citizens who help us plan our future: Mrs. Paula Bradley, Mrs. June Cronin, Gilbert C. Ives, Fred Kirsch, Mrs. Mary Ann Pitchford, Mrs. Irene Timmermiere and, in an advisory capacity, Glenn Felch.

As the new year begins the Foundation will be cooperating with the Village Board in the operation of the Elsie Museum in the Civic Center. This will require considerable time, energy and money. Glenn Felch has offered to supervise the planning and operation as much as he can. There is still a need for a visitor center that can serve the people who come to Elsie all through the year. Most important of all, your board would love to have suggestions from the membership as to the best ways in which to serve the village in the future. We would welcome your ideas at any time, but this winter would be especially important for us as we prepare to administer the museum and continue our work on the Village Hall and the commercial building. Your support for Historic Elsie Foundation has been the real reason for its existence. Your interest in our publications, our tours and our social activities has been greatly appreciated.



GAAR-SCOTT Steam Engine

The steam engine that has been resting next to the Buggy Shop on Mill Street has been presented to the Village by Nancy McDow, the present owner. It was originally used by her grandfather, William McDow, to power a sawmill. The Village Board is planning a full-scale restoration of the engine which is currently in storage behind the Civic Center.

Three photos at left show different views of the Gaar-Scott steam engine. Wayne Rowling stands near the engine in its familiar former location next to the Ouderkirk Buggy Shop. The lower two photos are by Paul Williams.



Recently, Cyrus A. Bunting, a former member of the HEF board, repainted the signs that welcome visitors to the Village of Elsay. The signs are located at the riverfront, the end of Mill Street near Joywood, and at the white oak tree near the Principia gate. This act of generosity makes it possible for visitors to enjoy again the carving on the signs.

Former ELSAH HISTORY editor Paul O. Williams, as many HEF members know, has been writing science fiction novels during the past few years. His fifth, AN AMBUSH OF SHADOWS, appeared at the end of last August, just before he won the John W. Campbell Award as the best new science fiction writer of the year. This award is given each year at the Hugo Ceremonies of the World Science Fiction Convention. Last year the convention was held on Labor Day Weekend in Baltimore.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR GENEROUS CONTRIBUTIONS:

Harold Bunting, Kirkwood, Missouri
Principia College Second Hand Store



"Elsah History" is published by Historic Elsay Foundation, Charles B. Hosmer, Jr. Editor. Subscription is with membership. Regular membership is \$5.00; sustaining membership is \$10.00 or more. Send to P.O. Box 117, Elsay, Illinois 62028.

